# The Resurrected Soul: A Study of Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus", "A Better Resurrection" and "Fever 103"

**Dr. Harith I. Turki**
**&**
**Instructor. Marwan K. Alkubaisy**

Sylvia Plath is one of the most important twentieth-century poets. Her poetry is considered one of the most productive and it is highly interpretive due to its variant nature. One can find in her poems multiple themes and images which in fact reflect the intensity of her poetic creativity. One of the most recurrent images in her poetry is the image of rebirth. Her continuous reference to death and rebirth mirrors her wish to die and rise again in a better way. This notion turned into an obsession that led, in a way, to a series of suicidal acts, ending her life. Therefore, she wishes to have a better life-after-death so that she will alleviate her burdened psyche. Her works, as a result, reflect her obsession with this image. In most of her poems, she makes use of archetypal myths, names and images of rebirth, like, for instance, her regular reference to the myth of the phoenix and other myths and legends which imply rebirth. Thereupon, the aim of this paper is to examine Plath's use of the image of rebirth in three of her poems: "A Better Resurrection", "Lady Lazarus" and "Fever 103".

"Lady Lazarus" is one of the most significant poems written by Sylvia Plath. This poem belongs to a group of poems entitled *Ariel*, which were published posthumously. It was written in 1962, but it was not published till 1965. The title of the poem calls the attention directly to the image of rebirth. It is given after the biblical Lazarus who was resurrected after death by the miracle of Christ. So, we are immediately reminded of the image of rebirth by the poet through the title of the poem. Moreover, Jo Gill states that the "best-

known 'narrative rite of rebirth' in Plath's canon is, of course, "Lady Lazarus".[1]The poem presents a resurgent subject, rising, renewed, from the ashes.

The poem starts with a comparison between Plath and Lazarus, where we can find that Plath, like Lazarus, is resurrected after her suicides:

I have done it again
One year in every ten
I manage it-----[2]

Death in Plath's canon is seen as a sort of a game in which Plath dies and then is reborn again. She seems to be very proud for what she considers as a gift of death and rebirth. These lines in fact reflect Plath's real experience at death. Before she wrote this poem, she tried to commit suicide, but she was saved by her physician. Linda Wagner-Martin speaks of Plath intrepidness in the poem, when she says that the speaker "is a woman who readily defies death to taunt the society that would contain, and constrain, her."[3] The word "again" in the first line refers to the second time Plath attempted to commit suicide, the first time was when she was eight, right after the death of her father. But what is surprising is that Plath thinks that she controls her life and her death. That is why she thinks that she does "manage it". She manages her rebirth, after her death. She becomes a "sort of walking miracle" (l.4). The miraculous act of resurrecting Lady Lazarus is compared to Plath's survival from her continuous suicides. As people refer to Lazarus as a miracle, also they start to see Plath as a "walking miracle", because she was saved twice from death.

In the subsequent lines, Plath aspires for the state of death where she will be buried and nothing of her physical beauty will remain:

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me. (ll.13-16)

The better resurrection that Plath is looking for presupposes that she should cast away and discard every earthly, physical and carnal side then this will lead to her being reborn into a new kind of life which is painless, and has nothing of her formal life she used to live and suffer from. Everything she has now must "vanish in a day." She must return to a womb-like state in which she gets rid of all her sins, like the biblical Lazarus, and then this will lead to her new birth. Jon Rosenblatt suggests:

> The entire symbolic procedure of death and rebirth in "Lady Lazarus" has been deliberately chosen by the speaker. She enacts her death repeatedly in order to cleanse herself of the "million filaments" of guilt and anguish that torment her. After she has returned to the womblike state of being trapped in her cave, like the biblical Lazarus, or of being rocked "shut as a seashell," she expects to emerge reborn in a new form.[4]

Plath wants to be reunited with her dead father whom she loves and adores so much. So, the best way she can achieve that is through getting rid of her present life, and then she can attain her resurrection into another life, where she can find her father. So, death for her is just away out to rebirth, a rebirth that reunites her with her father.

The following lines show Plath's miraculous nature at death and rebirth:

And I a smiling woman.
1 am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die. (17-19)

The "smiling woman" realizes very well that when she dies she will not lose the chance of being reborn. The image of the cat which has "nine times to die" reflects the speaker's certainty of being reborn, for she experienced death two times and she was saved. Plath identifies herself with the cat to show that both can have another life each time they die. What is so interesting is that people usually say that a cat has nine lives, but they never say "nine times to die." This is to indicate the theme of death and rebirth rather than life. She wants to accentuate her idea of rebirth after death, but not the ability to stay alive. Plath was totally unsatisfied with her life. She sees that her life is meaningless, so the best way she gives meaning to her life is through dying and rebirth. She foretells her impending death in this poem:

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see. (ll. 20-25)

It is only the third time that brings her ultimate death. Plath succeeded in ending her life in the third time. She expects death in number three, that is, the third time to commit suicide. Each decade passes, Plath attempts suicide. Because she believes that her life is meaningless, she decides to "annihilate each decade" with suicide. She is thirty and this is the third decade in her life, and each of the three

decades should end in suicide, but the last one will be fatal. Emphasizing on the idea of death rather than life in her poem, Plath wants to suggest that her life is “a trash”, and absurd, so the best thing to do is to “annihilate” her hollow life, and to prospect a rebirth into a better life empty from “a million filaments”, and this talent requires that people must come in a “peanut-crunching crowd” to see such a miraculous figure who is reborn into life when she wants. “A million of filaments” insinuate the speaker’s sins, and they can also mean the threads and ties that bound her to life, and which she is trying to get rid of.

Plath boasts about her ability to live and come back again. She thinks that she is very professional in this, for death is her craft, and rebirth is her talent:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call. (ll.41-46)

Because of her frequent attempts at suicide, she becomes very proficient in dying, and like art, every time she does it in a different way. She justifies her suicide attempts that they are a response to a call: “I guess you could say I've a call.” This call might be her downright determination to end her life of suffering, and to be reborn into a better life. But for her misfortune, whenever she does it, nothing changes in her life and she ends up in “the same place, the same face, the same brute” (l.51).

The best way for Plath to achieve the perfect resurrection is in burning her body all. This will allow her to be resurrected out of the ash of her body to have nothing from her former self: "Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair" (ll.81-82). Plath compares herself to the Phoenix, showing her ability to be resurrected every time she is burnt. Introducing this poem for BBC radio, Sylvia Plath said: "The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain resourceful woman."[5]

Another manifestation of the image of the resurrected soul is seen in Plath's "A Better Resurrection". This is in fact one of Plath's less anthologized poems. It does not appear in most of Plath's volumes of poetry. Plath was even accused of plagiarizing this poem from Christina Rossetti. Anyhow, the short poem shows Plath's apt desire to die and to be resurrected again. She first exposes the reasons for this wish. She appears in this poem to be totally desperate and she has lost her sense of living. She starts her poem by describing her status as a distressed woman: "I have no wit, I have no words, I have no tears" (l.1). Plath depicts her image as a witless, speechless and tearless woman, who has lost her ability of logic thinking, her ability to communicate with others and her feeling of being sad over heart-breaking things. These things identify the human being. Plath tries to show that she is totally detached from her life as a human being. She likes to die and to be resurrected into a better life, in which she will restore her wit, her words and her tears. In other words, she will have back her life as a natural human being.

Plath suffers from the loss of the proper human feelings which dwell in her heart. She laments the petrifaction of her heart due to the circumstances of her life: "My heart within me like a stone;/ Is numbed too much for hopes and

fears" (ll. 2-3). Her stony heart is no longer capable of "hopes and fears". It is in a state of numbness which indicates her lack of sensation. Usually a numbed person does not feel anything physical. But Plath uses the numbness of the heart to show that she is totally irresponsive to all feelings physical and spiritual especially of "hopes and fears." Plath's heart can longer hope or fear anything around her. Having lost these feelings, she must obliterate herself to be reborn again.

Moreover, Plath complains from physical alienation as well as personal one. In the previous lines, she shows that she is personally alienated when she shows how heart is no longer capable of any kind of communication with the world outside. The next lines demonstrate her being alienated physically: "Look right, look left, I dwell alone/ A lift mine eyes, but dimmed with grief" (ll. 4-5). She lives in utter seclusion. She is cut loose from any human associations. She is complaining to her saviour about the appalling conditions of her life. Her "A lift mine eyes, but dimmed with grief," accentuates her own wish to die and to leave this world. She raises her own eyes to her saviour to ask him for a better resurrection that will replace her former world of misery, degradation and alienation with a better world, where she can live without pain and desolation.

The final lines of the poem further reveal the poetess's sheer wish to die. Her life "is like the falling leaf" (l.7). Plath compares her present life to the falling leaf which is carried by winds and which is cut from its branch. Weak and easily carried, like the falling leaf, Plath is easily stimulated by her inner voices to end her life. This explains her successive attempts to commit suicide. This final comparison is followed by Plath's beseech: "O Jesus, quicken me" (l. 8). Plath appeals for her saviour to end her dejected life through a better resurrection. This is only possible if she loses her present

earthly life. That is why she implores Jesus to quicken this and replace her life with a better one. Thus, Plath, after exposing her despondent circumstances which she lives under, comes to the conclusion that she must leave this world of suffering and pity to be reborn in a more suitable world, where she can restore her happiness.

Another poem by Plath that reflects her treatment of the image of resurrection is "Fever 103." This poem also belongs to the collection of Plath's poems entitled *Ariel*. The poem was first written in 1962 and published posthumously by Ted Hughes in 1965. The poem is based on Plath's real life of depression and illness, where she suffered from a high fever. Judith Kroll links these personal events to Plath's treatment of the image of rebirth:

> To see the autobiographical details only as such is to regard Plath's vision of suffering and death as morbid, but to appreciate the deeper significance of her poetry is to understand her fascination with death as connected with and transformed into a broader concerned with the themes of rebirth and transcendence.[6]

Thus, the importance of death in Plath's poetry comes from the fact that it is a way to rebirth. She values death because it is her only link to the better resurrection she aspires for and envisions in her poems.

The poem begins with Plath's definition of what purity is. Her approach to defining purity is through pointing out what purity is not.

> Pure? What does it mean?
> The tongues of hell
> Are dull, dull as the triple
>
> Tongues of dull, fat Cerebus
> Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
> Of licking clean

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
The tinder cries.
The indelible smell (ll. 1-9)

Plath isolates the opposing features to purity. She attempts to show that purity is not what she describes after her first questioning line: "Pure? What does it mean"? All the lines that follow this question are devoted to revealing what she thinks purity is not. Like the metaphysical poets who identify God through what God is not, Plath starts to define purity by stating what purity is not. Plath links rebirth to purity because, for her, to be reborn means to be pure of the mundane and profane impurities.

Plath suggests that the present world is hell-like. Pamela J. Annas, commenting on Plath's lines, proposes: "In the kind of world we now inhabit, the mythological and Christian hells have lost their meaning and their force; real life is worse than anyone could have imagined hell to be." [7] So, the images Plath uses in her first three stanzas show the impurity of this world and its similarity to hell. She juxtaposes the Mythological hell of Cerebus, the guard of the gate of the underworld who has three dog heads, with that of the Christian hell of the triple just to show how hellish and torturing the life in the present world is. She even goes further than that to suggest that the inferno of the present world is worse than anyone can imagine. It is a world of "the sin, the sin/ The tinder cries/ The indelible smell." The reference to sin here indicates Plath's search for redemption and rebirth into a better world. As is the case with most of her poems, she divulges the devastating reasons that lead her to have the decision to leave this world and to be resurrected into a better world. This world is a world of "sin" and impure things which have "indelible smell". So, leaving it is better than living in it.

Plath moves in the following stanzas to her contemporary world. She tries to link the mythological, the Christian and the contemporary world of Isadora Duncan and Hiroshima. She fuses conflicting spheres to create an odd amalgam of the political, personal and the mythological. By doing so, she elevates her personal problems to the status of universal disaster. Isadora Duncan, the American dancer, who is sometimes known as the mother of modern dancing, is known for her tragic death. She was strangled by her own scarf that was caught in the wheel of a car.[8] So is Plath, who is remembered for the way she committed suicide through putting her head in the oven. Plath associates herself with international victims like, Isadora and the victims of Hiroshima to prove that this world is too harsh and it is not worth living in. So, it is better to cast it off and have a better life through a better resurrection.

As is mentioned above, Plath synthesizes the personal, the political, the natural and the universal in her poem to reflect her own idea of rebirth. Thus, in her coming stanzas, she moves to her personal state and describes her illness:

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, one
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss. (ll. 30-32)

In describing the fits of fever that she passes through, Plath wants to accentuate her grave desire to cast off this earthly body which is diseased with fever and transform herself into something else. She thinks firstly of art, as a good resort for her soul after she will cast off her body: "My head a moon/ Of Japanese papers" (ll. 39-40). Plath, therefore; seeks rebirth in the artifice of art. She believes in art as a redemptive tool that she can use to have a better resurrection.

Plath thinks also of nature as a good medium for rebirth. She also aspires to transform herself into an element of nature to get rid of the pain of life: "Does not my heat astound you. And my light. / All by myself I am a huge camellia / Glowing and coming" (ll. 42-44). Plath associates herself with the camellia, just to indicate how severe her fever is. She turns to be as white as a camellia, as a result of fever. This fever is necessary for the rituals of rebirth. She turns to be white, just to indicate her purity, which she sets out to define from the beginning of her poem till the end. This change to whiteness is a symptom of Plath's better resurrection.

Plath now is ready for her journey to the other life. She casts off her former life and she has a new one:

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim
By whatever these pink things mean (ll. 48-52)

This is done at the expense of dissolving her "selves …old whore petticoats" (l. 55). When Plath succeeds in dissolving her selves, that is, all the types of her former life, now she is ready to go "to Paradise" (l.56). Her life in paradise presupposes her purity as a condition to go there. Her purity can only be achieved if she get rid of her former selves, then she turns to be virgin.

To conclude, Plath reveals her grave desire to be reborn into another life. The life she aspires to is better than her former life of misery, degradation and anguish. She realizes that having this better resurrection demands her death as a first step. This might express her continuous attempts to commit suicide which she did later in her life. Thus, the poems chosen for the study

show how Plath is preoccupied with the idea of rebirth, and also prove her determination to achieve a better resurrection. The better resurrection for Plath means a rebirth into another world, a world Plath envisages in her poetry, which is painless and not miserable. So, in her poems studied here, she makes a kind of synthesis where she combines her personal life, along with politics, society, mythology as well as religion, just to show her concept of rebirth.

## *NOTES*

[1]Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 59.

[2]Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems by Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughs (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981), (ll.1-3). Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in my text, showing line numbers.

[3]Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003), 111.

[4]Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry of Initiation* (The University of South Carolina Press, 1979), 39.

[5]Sylvia Plath, quoted in Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 2005), 113.

[6]Judith Kroll, *Chapters in Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harpers & Row, 1976), 5.

[7]Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in the Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 132.

[8]Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*, p, 114.

## *BIBLIOGRAPHY*

Annas, Pamela J. *A Disturbance in the Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

Bassnett, Susan. *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 2005.

Beer, John. *Post-Romantic Consciousness: Dickens to Plath*. London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003.

Bloom, Harold. Ed. *Sylvia Plath: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New York: Library of Congress Cataloging, 2007.

Gill, Jo. *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Kroll, Judith *Chapters in Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harpers & Row, 1976.

Plath, Sylvia *The Collected Poems by Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Ted Hughs. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981.

Rosenblatt, Jon. *Sylvia Plath: Poetry of Initiation*. The University of South Carolina Press, 1979.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003.